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ABSTRACT

A course taught at Notre Dame on American Literature of the Westward Movement, in its broadest connotation, and thought to be the only one of its kind, is outlined. Organized by sections of the country, the course progresses from an introduction to: (1) the Seaboard and the Piedmont, (2) over the Appalachians, (3) the Old Southwest and Twain, (4) the Great Plains, (5) on to the Pacific, and (6) Sooners, Okies, and Alaskans. A warning to students that the literature selected is biased toward adventure, savagery, action, danger, and problems of survival permits unambiguous course selection. Both required and non-required reading is indicated. (AF)

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AMERICAN LITERATURE OF THE WESTWARD MOVEMENT

LOUIS HASLEY

PROBABLY SOMEWHERE IN OUR FIFTY STATES, possibly in several of them, there is a course taught in American Literature of the Westward Movement. Though I have sifted scores of college catalogs, I have found no such course but my own; and since I am convinced that it yields a set of valuable literary experiences giving bottom and imaginative immediacy to possibly the most pervasive and far-reaching phase of the American heritage, I feel warranted in offering an account of it.

The course was suggested to me some five years ago by my department head, John T. Frederick, now retired. Once it was suggested, the potentialities became quickly evident. The literature would, of necessity, be primarily historical and it would be predominantly fiction, even though there was some relevant poetry and a fair amount of non-fiction prose. American writers may not have produced a *Henry Esmond*, but there were the *Leatherstocking Tales*, *The Great Meadow*, *Roughing It*, *My Antonia*, *A Son of the Middle Border*, *Northwest Passage*, and *Giants in the Earth* as nuclei. And there was mighty good company in considerable numbers for that cluster.

A definition of the Westward Movement gave some difficulty inasmuch as historians themselves do not agree. Some confine it to the great movement between the Revolutionary and the Civil Wars. Some start earlier and stop with the vanishing of the frontier in 1890, the year free land was exhausted. Nevertheless, since the westward movement of population has continued to this day—10,000 "immigrants" move weekly into California—I saw no reason for not allowing myself the widest, most inclusive construction of the term within the framework of American history. In my course I like to cite also, though I do little more than that, what a writer on the Toledo

Blade, over a hundred years ago, declared: "The westward movement of the Caucasian branch of the human family from the high plains of Asia, first over Europe, and thence, with swelling tide, pouring its multitudes into the New World, is the grandest phenomenon in history." The American phase has by no means dimmed the luster of that mighty movement.

After considerable thought, testing and consulting, I came up with the following definition, which I have, in four times through the course, found no reason to change: *American literature of the Westward Movement is here interpreted to mean literature that represents life or civilization in any area of the United States as not yet having reached its own equilibrium or as striving toward an equilibrium in relation to more advanced areas.* Under this definition I would not include *McTeague* (set in stable San Francisco) but do include *The Octopus* (set in the unstabilized ranch district of the nearby San Joaquin Valley). I do not include writings about merely stagnant or backward areas (*Spoon River Anthology*, *Main Street*, *Tobacco Road*). And I exclude literature of the Revolution and the Civil War as not strictly relevant to the Westward Movement, though in minor ways some of it could be so considered.

The phrase "not yet having reached its own equilibrium" is taken to mean life that has not yet reached a predictable normality based on the usual elements of civilization: settled residences, a stable society with religious and educational institutions, and an established government. For example, the action of *The Scarlet Letter* occurs in a well established community with little reference to the undeveloped surrounding areas, while most of the action in *Northwest Passage* occurs in the rawest frontier Indian territory.

Right at the beginning of the course I indicate that we will move forward by large sections of the country, following the movement of the frontier from east to west. Here is the broad outline:

I. Introductory, II. Seaboard and Pied-

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mont, III. Over the Appalachians, IV. The Old Southwest and Twain, V. The Great Plains, VI. On to the Pacific, and VII. Sooners, Okies, and Alaskans.

I. In the INTRODUCTORY I lay down both the definition and the outline given above, mentioning the journey-toward-a-goal motif that characterizes all intelligent search and movement, both spiritual and physical.

II. SEABOARD AND PIEDMONT. I begin with Benet's *Western Star*, which is bi-located in Plymouth and Jamestown, and with several of Benet's short poems. I take up Simms's *The Yemassee* (South Carolina setting) and LeGrand Cannon's *Look to the Mountain* (New Hampshire). *Northwest Passage** (starred titles are required texts) and *Satanstoe** follow, Part I of the former and all of the latter dealing with the 1757-59 segment of the French and Indian Wars in New England and New York State and affording excellent comparisons for discussion and writing. As required reading, *The Leatherstocking Tales* are thus sidestepped in favor of *Satanstoe*, as nearly all of the seniors and juniors who take this one-semester, three-credit elective have read one or more of the Natty Bumppo novels. I do, however, treat them in lecturing on Cooper.

III. OVER THE APPALACHIANS. Two excellent novels carry us to the west of the Appalachians, Richter's *The Trees* and Elizabeth Madox Roberts' *The Great Meadow**.

IV. THE OLD SOUTHWEST AND TWAIN. Some treatment of native American humor on the Old Southwest frontier is given through Lynn's anthology, *The Comic Tradition in America**. In this text I use principally Hooper, Thorpe, Crockett, Paulding, and G. W. Harris—Blair's unsurpassed *Native American Humor* is scaled too large to suit my purposes. This is followed by Mark Twain's *Picture of His America**, which of the many Twain collections available contains, I believe, the best selections from his writings dealing with pioneering situations.

V. THE GREAT PLAINS. It is in the Great Plains section that one encounters God's plenty. Here are Cooper's *The Prairie*; Irving's *A Tour on the Prairie*, *Astoria*, and *The Adventures of Captain Bonneville*; A. B. Guthrie's *The Big Sky**, dealing with

guides, trappers, and mountain men who preceded the settlers; Hough's *The Covered Wagon*; Parkman's *The Oregon Trail*; Richter's *The Sea of Grass*, in the big Texas ranch area; Rolvaag's *Giants in the Earth**; three of Cather—*My Antonia**, *A Lost Lady*, and *Death Comes For the Archbishop*; Garland's *Son of the Middle Border* (pioneer boyhood in the Midwest) and *The Captain of the Gray Horse Troop* (love, Indians, and U. S. troops); Wister's *The Virginian*; Clark's *The Ox-Bow Incident*; Schaefer's *Shane**. Here several poems of Vachel Lindsay fit in nicely, including "The Ghost of the Buffaloes" and "The Santa-Fé Trail."

VI. ON TO THE PACIFIC. In going on to the Pacific we encounter Guthrie's *The Way West*; Bret Harte among the mining camps (stories and humorous verse); two classics of Southern California, Dana's *Two Years Before the Mast* and Helen Hunt Jackson's *Ramona*; Norris' *The Octopus**; and some ominous lines by the late prophet of the decay of Western civilization, Robinson Jeffers.

VII. SOONERS, OKIES, AND ALASKANS. Finally, since Oklahoma and Alaska were settled "last," I do not fail to read the exciting land-run into Oklahoma told in Ferber's *Cimarron*, and the pathetic exit of the Okies in Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath**. The best I can come up with for Alaska and Hawaii is *Ice Palace* (Ferber again) and Michener's *Hawaii*, though the latter is only mentioned since the eastward population movement to our island state overshadows the westward. And to close the circuit of movement from the East to the West to the spiritual East, I like to read to the class parts of Whitman's great poem, "A Passage to India."

In following the spatial continuity outlined above, Cooper and Twain present a slightly awkward problem, as each has works dealing with non-adjacent sections. It satisfies me best to take up all study of Twain in Section IV following the frontier humorists of the Old Southwest, whose heir he principally was, and to do likewise with Cooper in Section II except for holding analysis of *The Prairie* until Section V.

I should point out that I warn my students—in case any warning is desirable—

that the literature of the course, dealing much with pioneering hardships, is biased toward adventure, savagery, action, danger—problems of survival such as hunger, wounding, death; I want to be sure they do not expect works concerned with the problem of evil and salvation or works of philosophy, introspection, or domestic cultivated manners; but I assure them that our evaluations will recognize that metaphysically the outward, visible, and concrete fact or event is often less important than its inner, invisible, abstract meaning for the spirit, and that I mean both the sociological and the historical spirit of society as well as that of the individual psychologically and religiously considered.

Only a few of the non-required literary works cited are lectured on in any detail. Minimal coverage of these books is provided only in the hope that some students will be moved to explore them for their own satisfaction or as material for a term paper. I confess that most of my undergraduates would rather have more extended class discussion of the required texts than listen to lectures on works that they are not currently reading.

I make no apology for teaching a course in American literature that excludes outstanding writers that are the staple of most courses in American: Poe, Melville, Hawthorne, Dickinson, James, Robinson, Frost, Eliot, Faulkner. When counseling students, I point out that ideally the student would have had a survey or equivalent course in

American literature beforehand; and this not in the sense of prerequisite but to make sure he gets the more valuable course in case he takes only one. But ideal conditions seldom exist, and many students take the course who have had no other American literature course. To me at least, this is no cause for prolonged lament.

It remains to mention a few works of reference that may serve to strengthen the student's grasp of the historical and critical aspects of the Westward Movement and the literature embodying it. Most valuable is Henry Nash Smith's *Virgin Land*, interfusing history and literature while stressing the latter. Lucy L. Hazard's *The Frontier in American Literature* is still immensely useful. R. W. B. Lewis' *The American Adam* is often relevant and always incisive. Ray Allen Billington's historical monograph, *The Westward Movement in the United States*, is excellent. E. Douglas Branch's *Westward* is a large, highly readable treatment, stressing, as the subtitle has it, "The Romance of the American Frontier." Frederick Jackson Turner's *The Frontier in American History* is seminal, having started it all. For the older "American humor," two books are indispensable—Blair's *Native American Humor* and Rourke's *American Humor*. Numerous other reference works are of course available. And the scholar will not need to be told the value of consulting, in relation to the Westward Movement, the standard works dealing with American literature.



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